

Michael walks and talks to save the rhino

by P.J.C. Hughes

So many people say that Michael is lucky to have an employer who has possibly created, probably encouraged and certainly financed his public spiritedness. Not true, says the Managing Director of Associated Vehicle Assemblers Limited (AVA), Michael's employers.



A private moment at Ol Ari Nyiro ranch.

He walks anywhere, across Africa, across Europe, across America. He talks to anybody, from barefoot kids in Mombasa, to learned dons of the National Geographic Society, to the President of the United States.

But he does none of these things for a living. Not one step, not one word, has put one cent in his own pocket. He has a rare integrity, a single-minded and selfless devotion to a cause. Other men and women who exhibit this level of total commitment to something outside of themselves can usually be labelled eccentrics or philanthropists. In plain English 'mad' or 'rich'.

Michael is neither. He is no romantic nutcase. In his life, as in his walking, his feet are always firmly upon the ground. He is not rich. He walks not only for the rhino, but also to the bus stop. He can't afford a car. He has no private or 'independent means.' He works for a living, and always has.

Yet people call him lucky — lucky to have an employer who pays him a salary while he wanders around the globe with his rucksack and pet python, giving lectures in the street, in the halls of academia, and on television. Lucky to have an employer who has possibly created, probably encouraged

and certainly financed his public spiritedness.

This is not so.

Michael works as Estate Superintendent and does a remarkably good job. The company has granted him some sabbatical time for his rhino projects, but not much and not often. For most of his walks and tours, he has used his own earned leave days, extended more by his own input in overtime rather than by company concessions. Never once has Michael asked the company for more than leave of absence.

He came to the company in 1978. Because he was 'good with animals' he was employed as a security officer, with special responsibility for the firm's guard dogs — patrolling the factory grounds, the stockpiled crates of vehicle parts and the lines of newly completed trucks, pick-ups and cars.

Today the vehicle park is 'guarded' by a gaggle of happy geese. Behind the crates there are free-range chickens and the company's pet tortoise. On the rough outskirts of the grounds there are fresh tree plantings and maize fields. Around the front lawn of the administration block there are exotic shrubs and flowers . . . and grape vines!

And it is no coincidence that in a dusty little village on the other side of the security

fence, amid the huts there is a thriving population of rabbits, in hutches made of bits of wood marked Peugeot, Toyota and Mitsubishi!

Michael started all that.

Soon after he joined the company, there was a major *baroohah* among the packing cases one day, when staff discovered a snake and tried to beat it to death with a stick. The whole plant — a labour force of 600 — came to a standstill when Michael popped it in his kit bag, saying he would release it in the bush later . . . as snakes did all sorts of good things — like catching rats!

Somewhere between then and now, AVA's grounds have progressed from a utilitarian industrial plot to a smaller version of Bamburi's famous nature reserve — factory, fauna and flora — and Michael has moved from Security Officer to Estate Superintendent.

Michael's unassuming manner remains unchanged whether he's talking to presidents or school children visiting the plant. His total and utterly sincere concern for the company and the environment is an extraordinary quality.

And about that 'lucky' label: Yes, the company is very lucky to have Michael Werikhe.



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... Michael

Even as a young boy Michael had a passion for nature which was recognised by both his teacher and fellow students.

In 1971 Jamini Vincent, the science teacher at Hospital Hill primary school, talked me into organising a nature club for standard seven pupils. We went on trips to nearby points of interest such as City Park and the National Museum. We had one main rule: Don't fall in the water! But almost invariably, someone did.

Michael Werikhe was in standard seven that year, but he was not a member; he was an expert, a resource person. During the rainy season, a pupil turned over a large stone near the curb of the school driveway. Under it was what looked like a metallic earthworm. 'Call Michael, quick!'

He came running, and gently picked up the tiny creature. He told us it was a blind worm snake, a harmless burrower. Many hands reached out that day to touch the silver sliver of snake in his palm.

Jamini Vincent despaired because Michael's exam scores were not as high as she expected. But she recognised Michael's passion for nature, and provided space and equipment so he could share it with the school. In the school yearbook, Michael wrote:

Snakes and I

Early in 1966, I went to live in Rabai, a place about twenty miles from Mombasa. I

had very few friends, and spent much of the time exploring the countryside which was full of little bushes, coconut trees and little pools. I saw many different kinds of snakes and lizards and wished that I knew more about them.

One day I was out exploring with a boy from Rabai. I noticed a green snake just under a bush. My friend said that it was a green grass snake and that it was harmless . . . I could see that its skin was all dried and flaking. My friend explained that the snake was getting ready to shed its skin . . . I picked it up with a stick and took it home with me. . . I watched it and handled it a lot and in this way I grew familiar with snakes and lost my fear of them.

I saw many other kinds of snakes at Rabai, but my friend told me not to try to pick up any of the others as he was not sure which were poisonous and which were harmless.

When I came back to Nairobi I was determined to find out more about snakes. I started going regularly to the Snake Park where I became friendly with most of the staff. I got books and read about snakes — first African ones, and then snakes from all parts of the world.

Recently I gave a talk to the children in Standard VII. I was able to talk about snakes for almost an hour without repeating myself . . .

You must be proud of your student now, Jamini. There are many ways to reach for the stars.

Fleur Ng'weno

Here is proof that you don't have to have seen a rhino to care deeply for its survival.

The photo in the daily paper showed a man with a rucksack and an umbrella, and the caption said: 'Mr Werikhe walked from Mombasa to Nairobi during his annual leave, to raise money for the endangered black rhino.'

'Five hundred kilometres along the tarmac, during his holiday!' I thought. 'This chap must be remarkable.'

The phone rang that night and a friend said, 'I have here the young man who has just walked for rhino. But his great passion is snakes. He walked with a python round his neck for company. He should talk to your son'.

My son Emanuele, then about seventeen, was a passionate herpetologist. Snakes were his interest and his friends, and he had collected hundreds of them. He and Michael spoke at great length, the beginning of many telephone conversations to come. At the end of that first one, Emanuele said 'I am impressed. Not only does Michael care and know a lot about snakes, he also walked for rhinos, and, you know, he has never seen any yet! I invited him to Ol Ari Nyiro to see one.' Michael, however, could not come immediately as he had to go back to work. They planned that he should come during his next leave. They started writing to each other.

Then, a few months later, my son was killed by one of his snakes. In his diary, I found a letter to Michael, with his address. I wrote to him and invited him to come to Laikipia anyway, as this was Emanuele's wish. I met him in Richard Leakey's office at the Museum; a serious young man with glasses, an inspired way of talking, and a gentleness and a determination to succeed.

In Ol Ari Nyiro, he chose to go out on patrol with our anti-poaching group. There, he saw his first rhino, which we nicknamed 'Michael' after him. He fell in love with the beauty and peace of the land. He captured and released huge pythons and when he left, we were friends. He had left a note, . . . 'I shall strive to follow his example by loving nature.'

A month later he wrote me he had decided to donate a shield in my son's memory to the Wildlife Clubs of Kenya, which would go every year to the best essay on reptiles.

Only an extraordinary person can walk for an animal he had not seen and create a meaningful — and costly — tribute to the memory of a boy he had never physically met.

It was 1983.

Michael has gone — and walked since — a very long way. Few people have managed to fulfill their dream as he has. It all began in a way with that first visit.

Kuki Gallmann 9

It all began here.

